

# articles

## A Note from the Translator of Gao Xingjian's *Aesthetics and Creation*

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### Abstract

This article contextualizes and provides authoritative bibliographical information on the English language translations of Gao Xingjian. It also provides valuable biographical information that will help readers new to Gao's work to understand the importance of his art.

บริบทของบทความนี้และให้รายละเอียดข้อมูลทางบรรณานุกรมในการแปลภาษาอังกฤษของ Gao Xingjian นอกจากนี้ยังมีข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับชีวประวัติที่จะช่วยให้ผู้อ่านใหม่เข้าใจความสำคัญของงานศิลปะของ Gao Xingjian

### Gao Xingjian inside and outside China

Gao Xingjian enjoyed instant celebrity status in China when his plays *Juedui xinhao* (1982; *Absolute Signal*) and *Chezhan* (1983; *Bus Stop*) performed to wildly ecstatic audiences at the People's Art Theatre in Beijing. Both plays did not comply with the required social-realist guidelines for cultural production, and Gao Xingjian became the first of many casualties during the "anti-spiritual-pollution" campaign of 1983. *Bus Stop* was banned after the tenth performance, and when tipped off that the authorities were sending him to a prison farm in Qinghai province he did not wait around, but immediately fled the capital. For the next five months he travelled on the fringes of civilisation until the campaign ended at the end of the year, while in the interim publishers had no option but to shelve his short story manuscripts. His third

play *Wild Man* (*Yeren*, 1985) was staged to high critical acclaim, but all the performers were cautioned against taking part in other of his play productions. He continued to be singled out for various forms of insidious harassment, and his fourth play *The Other Shore* (1986) was banned at rehearsal.

While Gao Xingjian was being targeted in a vendetta by the authorities, his plays were already being performed abroad, and while in Europe on invitation in late 1987, he settled in Paris to spend some time writing without political interference. What had originally been intended as a temporary stay became a permanent relocation, and in 1997 he adopted French citizenship. His literary career in China had spanned little over five years, but he found publishers in Hong Kong and Taipei for his prolific writings, as well as translators for his major writings. At the same time, productions of his plays in many languages continued to grow. His contributions to world literature have been acknowledged by international awards, and when he was crowned 2000 Nobel Laureate of Literature, it was the first time in the 100-year history of the Nobel Prize that it had been awarded for a body of works originally created in the Chinese language. At the time his major works were also available in French, Swedish and English editions.

To date Gao Xingjian has written eighteen plays, and a large number of these have led to a total of over 100 different productions in various countries throughout the world. He has himself directed a number of his plays, including productions of his most recent works: *Bayue xue* (2000; *Snow in August*) and *Le Quêteur de la Morte* (2003; *The Man Who Questions Death*). His novels *Lingshan* (1990; *Soul Mountain*) and *Yigeren de shengjing* (1999; *One Man's Bible*), and his collection of short stories *Gei wo laoye mai yugan* (1988; *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather*) are well known to readers in many languages, with *Soul Mountain* translated into over thirty languages, often based on French or English editions. Also an accomplished artist, his unique ink paintings are well known and highly prized. Since 1985 he has held over eighty solo exhibitions, and a number of substantial volumes of his artworks have been published. He is currently editing his third experimental film, *Mei de zangli* (forthcoming 2013; *Requiem for Beauty*) that is scheduled to premiere in Singapore.

Less familiar to general readers are Gao Xingjian's critical writings that address salient issues that confront practitioners in the creative arts, as well as discuss the rationale for the strategies he has adopted in his innovative creations in

fiction, theatre, art and filmmaking. These writings demonstrate the extraordinary insights of a powerful intellect that will broach no compromise with either politics or the market, and in fact are as important as his creative works for their contributions to world thinking on the creative arts in the globalised world of the present age. Informed by his erudition in Chinese and European cultural traditions and practices, he plumbs the dynamics of language, narration, theatre and the visual arts to their origins in order to forge a creative path that is uniquely his own. Over the years his critical writings have been published in the following volumes: *Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan* (1981; Preliminary Explorations into the Art of Modern Fiction), *Dui yizhong xiandai xiju de zhuiqiu* (1988; Quest for a Modern Form of Theatre), *Meiyou zhuyi* (1996; Without Isms), *Au plus près du réel* (1997), *Lun chuanguzuo* (2008; *Aesthetics and Creation*) and *Lun xiju* (2010; On Theatre).

For the English edition of *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012) Gao Xingjian has selected major essays drawn from his 2008 Chinese collection bearing the same title, as well as other essays, including some that have yet to be published in Chinese. The English edition also contains my Introduction “Aesthetic Dimensions of Gao Xingjian’s Fiction, Theatre, Art, and Filmmaking” that provides a contextual background for understanding the range and depth of Gao Xingjian’s unending quest to satisfy his insatiable aesthetic self.

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### Information about the English language translator of Gao's work

Mabel Lee PhD FAHA taught modern Chinese literature and history (1966-2000) at the University of Sydney where she is an adjunct professor of Chinese Studies; she is also currently an honorary professor at the Open University of Hong Kong.

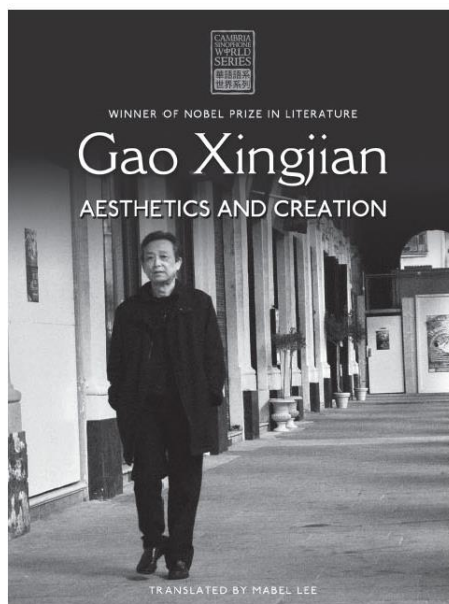
In 1991 she was in Paris to meet the poet Yang Lian, and they paid a visit to Gao Xingjian. She offered to translate his novel *Soul Mountain*, and subsequently arranged for him to visit Sydney on three occasions: in 1993 to stage a performance of his play *Between Life and Death* at the University of Sydney; in 1996 to present the International Lecture at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS); and in 2000 for the launch of the English edition of *Soul Mountain*, just four months prior to the announcement that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

During the mid-1990s she included textual studies of Gao Xingjian's plays and non-fiction in her literature courses. Her Gao Xingjian translations include *Soul Mountain* (2000), *One Man's Bible* (2002), *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* (2004), *The Case for Literature* (2006/7), and *Aesthetics and Creation* (2012).

She has also published a large number of uncollected essays on his works, such as "Two Autobiographical Plays by Gao Xingjian", the Introduction in Gilbert C. F. Fong's translation of Gao Xingjian, *Escape & the Man Who Questions Death* (2007), "Aesthetics Dimensions of Gao Xingjian's Painting," in *Between Figurative and Abstract: Paintings by Gao Xingjian* (2007), and "The Writer as Translator: On the Creative Aesthetics of Gao Xingjian", in Kwok-kan Tam and Kelly Kar-yue Chan ed., *Culture in Translation: Reception of Chinese Literature in Comparative Perspective* (2012).

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The present collection takes the title *Aesthetics and Creation* from the name of the Chinese collection from which most of these essays are drawn, but it also includes some of Gao's most recent unpublished essays.

University of Sydney academic Mabel Lee is the translator, and the book also includes her authoritative introductory essay that contextualizes Gao's significant position as an independent and uncompromising voice in the noisy hype of the globalized world of the present in which creative writers and artists are forced to conform with the demands of political and other group agendas, or with market forces, in order to survive. In incisive and cogently argued essays, Gao exposes the political dynamics of so-called "modernity" in Western literature and art, and how this has been enthusiastically embraced in China since the 1980s.

In other essays Gao insightfully analyses traditional and modern European and Chinese notions of fiction, theatre and art, and elaborates on what aspects of writers and artists from both cultures have informed him in developing his own aesthetics in narration, performance and the visual arts. These essays testify to the extent of the cosmopolitanism of Gao's aesthetics that both informs and are manifested in his literary and art creations.

This pathbreaking book has importance and relevance to the general reader with an interest in literature and art as a creative human pursuit that is not demarcated by national or cultural boundaries. This book is both indispensable and inspiring reading for intellectuals and informed readers who regard themselves as citizens of the world. For academics, researchers, and students engaged in the disciplines of literature and visual art studies, world literature studies, comparative literature studies, performance studies, theatre studies, cultural studies, narrative fiction studies, and studies in the history of literature and the visual arts in modern times, this book is essential and thought-provoking reading.

  
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